

>> Stern: -- get out of Auschwitz. But we -- they loaded us up again on a cattle train, and we went to Sachsenhausen. It was, it was a camp, forced labor camp. There was no crematories, so it was, by far, a better feeling.

I backtrack. For one moment, because this was an experience which I'll never forget because when I was in that Barrack 25 -- and we didn't do anything all day, like I've said, and just very periodically was just taking a beam back and forth and so forth -- I sat down next to the barrack. It was like a big stone, and I sat down, and something really -- I'm not trying to go ahead and portray here myself as a prophet or like a -- and I don't fantasize. But I sat down, and somebody -- like I was told, "Get up." You know, something made me get up, and I got up from that boulder. It was more of a boulder than a stone because it was larger. And I got up a little bit, just several feet away from it, and it didn't take but a few seconds that a German guy, a German policeman, a German SS guy, came by with a truck and shot at this guy and killed him, right then and there, for no reason, none whatsoever, as far as I can tell.

>> Interviewer: He was where you were?

>> Stern: It was right there in the same spot where I was. So again, this was something -- the reason I'm saying this is because this is not something that you can explain or rationalize. It's pure luck, or God's will. Of course, at that time, we were trying, or I was -- losing, absolutely, faith in God because I did not -- I really didn't believe in God anymore at that time. I lost faith in God, maybe earlier because I've seen too many things. I've seen too many things with pious Jews. I've seen too many things, what the Germans have done, and the Poles, the Polish -- again, the Polish, the ones with the band with the swastika on it. What they did with the most pious Jews,

with the Jews with the beards, with the locks, you know, those rabbis, the most -- and there was something which you cannot describe, you cannot go ahead and write. It's impossible to really sit and describe and be normal because nobody in their right mind can comprehend what transpired, and it seems like a fantasy, and it seems like you're making up a story which is not real because we were all living in the 20th century in the most civilized -- and the most civilized country in the world is -- the German people, those were the Germans, the *Deutsche*, *Hochdeutsche*. Those were the biggest intelligentsia, if you will. What they have done. So I lost faith because when I was transferred from, from Auschwitz to Oranienburg, and those were forced camps. From Oranienburg to Sachsenhausen -- excuse me. From Sachsenhausen to Oranienburg.

>> Interviewer: How long did you spend at Sachsenhausen?

>> Stern: Sachsenhausen, I spent not long at all. It was just a matter of a month to six weeks, and I cannot remember. But I was trans -- at that time, and that was during the end of 1944, where I was shipped or sent from one camp to the other, and I went like from Sachsenhausen to Oranienburg, from Oranienburg to Kaufering, from Kaufering to Landsberg -- no. Excuse me. From Oranienburg -- from Sachsenhausen to Oranienburg, from Oranienburg to Dachau. No, I was right, excuse me, because the last two camps were Dachau and -- I was liberated in Allach, which was about 5 kilometers from Allach. But then I was -- we were about four to six weeks in each of those camps I mentioned, and we came to Dachau, and that was another experience because this was -- I've heard of that word, "Dachau," and we knew then that, again, this is the end of our being there. And I'm really kind of shortening the whole story because -- I'm not giving you the details as far as the other camps are concerned because, again, it would be too -- I'm giving you the highlights.

As you know, we only served with the males. There were separate -- females were in a separate camp. There were only males. At no

time, at no one given time I can say that any of the SS had any compassion or any kind of a nice word that somebody -- you know, that I would experience somebody to say, It's gonna get better, or, Don't worry, or something like that. At no time had you had that luxury of hearing anything of the sort. You were doomed to die, and it was just a matter of when.

>> Interviewer: Did you wonder, when you were being shipped around to these different camps, why you were being -- why they were moving you?

>> Stern: well, we knew from some German, from some German public, when we came to Oranienburg, we saw some -- or when we came to Sachsenhausen, we saw some German people, and they were telling --

>> Interviewer: Civilians.

>> Stern: Civilians, and we were -- but for a brief moment. They were not with us because they immediately separated us and put us, again, in the camps. And we had -- we more or less figured that this is the beginning of the end, as far as the war was concerned, that something must be happening.

>> Interviewer: Is it '45 by now?

>> Stern: By now it was '45. By now it was '45, and when I got to Dachau, I was completely -- I was just a complete, I would say, skeleton. I couldn't -- I got sick. I was -- I had scarlet fever. I was burning up with fever. Still with this fellow, Dr. Reiter, who was, believe it or not, who was with me.

>> Interviewer: The same doctor from --

>> Stern: The same doctor, the same doctor, and he was telling me -- he was giving me some coffee, chicory, you know, coffee which was left. I also, again, forgot because there's no way I can tell you everything because I -- when I was in Auschwitz -- I go back to that. When I was in Auschwitz, I was sick, too, and

I couldn't, I couldn't eat sometimes my soup, this little water, but I treasured it so much that I was trying -- I would put that little soup behind my bunk. And there was an inspection, as [indistinct] you know, and they came and they caught the soup that I was hiding. They said, "You're not supposed to have any soup in the barracks." They took me outside, and they took the shovel of a -- they took the handle off the shovel, put me on a chair, and laid 25 on my rear end. I'm telling you, I only felt three. I passed out. I was told it was 25. I was swollen, and through this fellow Reiter, Dr. Reiter, who saved my life -- because I couldn't even make a move, and there were inspections in the barracks. They were coming in. Of course, anybody who couldn't move from his, from his cubicle, from his bed, so to speak, was taken right away to the crematoria -- or to the gas chambers first. Not that they weren't burning alive people. They were burning them alive, too, because the screams were -- we heard them.

But this, again, that Dr. Reiter came in, and he died right then -- there. He never got out of Dachau, and that was just a few days before we got liberated. In Dachau, I got so sick, and I couldn't walk, and then all of a sudden, they started moving Dachau. They said, "Let's get out," out of Dachau because we already heard the machine guns, and we heard the heavy artillery, artillery just booming. You know, the -- and they said, "March," and I said this was my last chance to go ahead and march, and I marched for about 5 kilometers or something like that to Allach, which was not a -- it was a small, tiny little camp, and I fell, and I couldn't walk anymore.

The rest of them walked, of course. The reason I'm here is because I did not walk. If I would have walked, they killed them. They were all shot to death. That was the death march. I, again, was spared. I survived because I could not walk, and I remained in that little camp, and then we saw, after a couple of days and a couple of nights -- and I was taken care of in the camp by nobody. I don't know how I survived. And they were

bombing. The artillery shell were falling, and we looked up. One guy comes from our prison's inmates, runs in and hollers, "I see a white sheet up there! I see a white sheet up there!" And they looked at the towers, and the towers, nobody was there. The guards left the towers. They put up a white sheet, but they weren't there. Everybody was gone, as far as the Germans were concerned, and everybody who could, who had any ounce of strength at that time, tried to run out of the barracks and ran to the kitchen in order to get any kind of food. Of course, I couldn't move. Needless to say, I was there, and I saw, then, when the American army -- and Allach is approximately 15 kilometers from Munich -- marched in. The guys who had enough strength, they brought them in on their arms. I remember that they were -- I looked at them. They were short, little guys, American boys, American soldiers, with short, little -- those M rifles, I guess, those short, little rifles, and they were brought on the shoulders of quite a bunch of inmates. And that's the way I got liberated, which was April 30, 1945. That was the day I got liberated.

>> Interviewer: Do you remember how you felt? I mean, did it all -- did it seem unreal to you? Can you remember anything about how that -- how you felt when you saw those soldiers come in?

>> Stern: Oh. I don't think that you could, that you could exhibit any emotions because you were -- I was so sick, and I was so weak that I really -- inwardly I was overjoyed. But if you would have been the soldier, and you were to look at me, there was no reaction because I, I, I could not. I could not move. I was flat gone. And they put us -- the American army put us under quarantine right after they let everybody run to kitchens and eat, and a lot of guys died right after the first, second, third, and fourth day because they ate so much that they immediately -- I mean, they fell like flies. And then maybe this was a blessing in disguise because I couldn't eat. A lot of them went to the bunkers of -- like there were bunkers with potatoes next to the kitchen. They started eating raw potatoes, and they

killed themselves, and then the American army, they realized what's going on. They put us in a quarantine and rationed us, as far as the food was concerned. And that was just about the end of my -- of course, April 30, 1945, which I'll never forget in my life, and I will never forget June the 8th, 1949, four years afterwards, which, at that time, I was married my wife.

>> Interviewer: When did you make your way to the --

>> Stern: I met my wife in 1945. Beg your pardon?

>> Interviewer: Was it in a DP camp?

>> Stern: It was in a -- no, it was not in a DP camp. It was in a -- I already got out of the DP camp and lived in an apartment and had a room in a German family -- with a German family.

>> Interviewer: Was this still in Allach?

>> Stern: In Karlsfeld. This is again about 3 kilometers after Allach.

>> Interviewer: Uh-huh.

>> Stern: It was Karlsfeld. I lived there with a German family, and two guys which I got to know in that quarantine, we went together. And one guy happened to be my brother-in-law, now, I mean. Afterwards, after we got -- because I weighed, I believe, 87 or 89 pounds when I got out.

>> Interviewer: You were given med -- were you ever in hospital then?

>> Stern: No.

>> Interviewer: You weren't ever in hospital?

>> Stern: No, No. It was -- I was given some medication, but I was never in a -- they never put me in hospital. I don't think -- I don't recall any hospitals. And I don't know. I also didn't want to be in the DP camp. I wasn't too long in the DP camp. I

crawled out of the DP camp because I couldn't believe that this is it. I felt like, let me crawl out from this because again, we were encircled. In a quarantine, again, you had like a ghetto-type situation. So I crawled on my four, on my four -- you know, and with the two guys, and we got into an apartment. And this was -- I'm not talking about right away. This was about three or four weeks afterwards, which I kind of got a little bit -- because they rationed us, and they gave us some food, and I came to a little bit.

But I met my wife in 1945, end of 1945, where this -- my brother-in-law went to Poland from Germany to see if any -- if he can find anybody survived. And he brought his sister. He found his sister, which is my wife. He found her, and he brought her --

>> Interviewer: In Poland.

>> Stern: No, he found her -- well, yeah, he found her in Poland because she was liberated in Leipzig, but she went to Poland to see --

>> Interviewer: If she could find --

>> Stern: -- if she --

>> Interviewer: Can find anybody.

>> Stern: -- can find anybody. So they met up, and he brought her back to Germany because we didn't want to remain in Poland or in -- matter of fact, wouldn't want to remain in Europe. And then I went from there, from Karlsfeld, I went to *München*, to Munich.

>> Interviewer: Were you married by this time?

>> Stern: Uh-uh, no. We married June 16, 1946. And I have four kids now, nine grandchildren now, with a tenth coming. And we made a life in Columbia, South Carolina.

>> Interviewer: If I could just ask you to go back just a little. You told me it was June of '49 when you came to this country?

>> Stern: On June the 8th, 1949, on the *General MCRae* military boat. We were two weeks on the Atlantic Ocean. We sailed from Bremerhaven two weeks, *General MCRae* was the boat, the name of the boat, and we came to New York. They explained the Statue of --

>> Interviewer: What was --

>> Stern: what was the feeling, as far as New York?

>> Interviewer: Yes. What did you think when you saw the Statue of Liberty?

>> Stern: It's hard, it's hard, it's hard to describe, really. Again, just so overwhelming. It's so -- because I had my wife with me, and I had my daughter. We already -- because we married in '46. I had an 18-months' kid. She was born in December '47. The joy was so tremendous. They explained to us, and we saw -- we knew -- you know, as a kid, we learned a little bit. The schooling, of course, in Poland was -- I say unfortunate; maybe fortunately. We don't have as good a system, educational system here as in Poland. The history or geography or math or whatever, we had, by far, on a higher standard. But we were just exuberant, and we were just kissing the ground. Up to this moment -- listen, I'm a businessman now, and I'm independent, but at no time, and I mean at no time have I taken this place, America, for granted. I worship every day the ground I walk on, and so does my wife because I've been afterwards in many, many countries, and I've seen all of Europe practically. I went to the Soviet Union one time to look for somebody. And also I found out that during 19 -- I had two cousins from Kielce, which they were hiding in Russia, and they came back. They came back to Kielce, only in 1945, mind you -- to be -- for one of my cousins to get killed in a pogrom in Kielce in 1945. His brother, which

is, again, my second cousin, his brother, went to Israel, but he went berserk, I guess, and hanged himself in a bathroom.

>> Interviewer: In Israel?

>> Stern: In Israel.

>> Interviewer: Did you ever think of going to Palestine when you were -- when you were still in Germany, did you consider going to Palestine?

>> Stern: I registered immediately when I got my liberation papers from the American army, and I got some papers in possession. I don't know how many survivors have it. But I have them. When I got on my own -- when I got out and got my papers in 1945, I -- the Joint Distribution Committee, along with HIAS, and the HIAS was working very intensively to register to come either to Israel -- Palestine -- or to the States. Being the Polish quota, that you were on the Polish quota, a Polish citizen, which, we weren't Polish citizens then. I was stateless. We were on the bottom of the list. The German priority, Czechoslovakian, Austrian, Russian -- the Polish quota was on the bottom of the list. But I remembered my father had a brother here, which is my uncle. And I remember that I mailed letters. My dad has written letters to the States before the war, telling him how badly he would like to come to the States, and his brother, which is my uncle, he was trying to work on it, to bring us to the States. And as a matter of fact, if the war wouldn't break out in September 1, 1939, my mother, my father, and myself and brother would have been in the States. But my two sisters would not because one of them was married, and the other one was to be engaged, and they wanted to remain in Poland. And we're supposed to come here, and for us to bring them to the States.

But anyway, I'm telling you that I registered with the HIAS, but I also remembered the address of my uncle, for some reason or another, which -- I lost my memory, completely, really, about

what transpired in some instances in the forced labor camps. who I served with, I wouldn't recognize, a lot of them. It's funny how you remember things, and some of them escape completely my memory. And I remember that my -- letters I was taking into the -- to mail -- into the --

>> Interviewer: Post office.

>> Stern: Post -- not post office, but to the mail -- on the corner, you know, on the --

>> Interviewer: Oh, yeah. The mail box.

>> Stern: The mail boxes.

>> Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

>> Stern: As a matter of fact, they told me, go ahead and holler, or knock on the box and tell the man, you know, where is it going to. I remember Lexington, South Carolina.

>> Interviewer: Lexington.

>> Stern: Lexington, South Carolina. Gabriel Stern, Lexington, South Carolina, USA. I remember that. And I wrote a letter to Gabriel Stern, Lexington, South Carolina, with no, with no street address.

>> Interviewer: Street address, yeah.

>> Stern: And he received it. And he was working to bring me, and through his efforts, I came to Columbia, South Carolina. He guaranteed my coming here with my wife.

>> Interviewer: And that was in June '49 when you --

>> Stern: That was in June 1949, June the 8th, when I came here.

>> Interviewer: That's when you first came. what were your first impressions of Columbia? what did you make of it?

>> Stern: well, first, let me say that when I came, I came to New York, and I spent -- and I also had an aunt, which was also my brother's -- my father's sister, which is the same uncle's sister as well. She lived in Beaufort, South Carolina. She was the one who came to New York and to the port to receive us. And we stayed there a long 24 hours in New York, and she put us on the, either *Silver Meteor* or *Silver Star*, which runs from New York to Miami, stops in Columbia. And we came to Columbia after 24 hours being in New York. New York, of course, in the 24 hours -- I had cousins that lived there, and they were at the port, too, and they showed us around. Needless to say, it was overwhelming. We just could not put -- we didn't know where to put our eyes. It was all -- everything was just like, you know, like you're imagining. It's a dream or something like that.

we came to Columbia, and, of course, the only thing which was trying to go ahead is be self-efficient and to get as quickly as I possibly could, to get my life going with my wife and child. My uncle was extremely good to me by taking me in -- and my family into his home on [indistinct] Drive here in Columbia because, again, Columbia was not -- 60,000 people at the time. The Farmers Market was on Assembly Street. And after six weeks, I -- or after two weeks -- no, after six weeks, I left my uncle's place. I worked after a week being in the States. I started working in grocery stores as a helper, but I couldn't understand any English.

>> Interviewer: None at all?

>> Stern: None, none whatsoever. I knew a little bit. I mean, I knew single words because of Latin. I had some Latin in school, and surprisingly, that helped me quite a bit. And I spoke German very well. In Poland I had, I had German lessons in school, and being in camp helped me as far as German was concerned. And that couple of years of Latin helped me a lot. And when I came here, I picked up the language quite easy. It wasn't as hard for me as it was for my wife, which, she was always at home, and I was

immediately outside trying to look for work. After six weeks, I say, "Thanks, Uncle. I appreciate for everything you did," and I moved out and got myself an apartment and went to work as a carpenter with no language. Picked up a guy who thought I am hitch-hiking. I wasn't hitch-hiking, but he thought I am because I was working on the Beltline, and I was trying to get to a bus to get to Assembly Street to see if I can find anything. And he was mumbling to me. To me it sounded like it was mumbling. "Do you want to get a ride?" or something like that. And I understand more or less what he wants, and I got into it, and he says to me, "what kind of work do you do?" And me, in that broken, broken, English, I said, "Me looking -- me joiner work." I said "joiner." The reason I said "joiner" rather than "carpenter," if you pick up a dictionary, you'll see that a carpenter is really -- in the dictionary, for some reason or another it says "joiner," you know, if you take a Polish or a German dictionary, it translates from one to the other as a joiner rather than a carpenter.

>> Interviewer: So you were a joiner.

>> Stern: So I was a joiner. I told him I'm a joiner. He said, "What do you mean, joiner?" So I explained to him that I'm doing -- I'm hammering. And he said, "Look, if you can't find any work" -- because I told him that "Me look work. Me look work." Something like that. And he said -- and he let me off on Assembly because I said I'm going Assembly Street. The reason I went to Assembly Street is because my uncle had a store there, and I was trying to go ahead and find something over there if I can be of some help to somebody; not to his store, necessarily. And he told me, and he said -- he pulled out a piece of paper, and he said, "My name is F. L. Robuck. If you can't find any work, come to me. I'm in Cayce, South Carolina, Building Supply, Incorporated," just like that, and handed to me a card. The same moment I took that card, and I took a bus, and I said, "I want to go to Cayce," again, in broken English. They told me to take

some transfers, and that was, that was some ordeal to go -- to transfer and, you know, to go to Cayce.

>> Interviewer: It still is. It still is to some of us.

>> Stern: Probably. It probably still is. And I wanted to see where that place is so I can finally go ahead and go. And the same afternoon, the very same afternoon, I went home. I had a camera, a Leica, which I brought from Germany. That was the only thing I had, and I traded Leica for a motorbike, a bicycle with a little motor on it. And I traveled with the motorcycle, myself, into that Building Supply, to Cayce, not with a bus.

>> Interviewer: [laughing] Did he give you a job?

>> Stern: He gave me a job and paid me 50 cents an hour, and I was, I was elated because after two weeks, he gave me 60 cents an hour, which was -- it wasn't the 10 cents as much as it was that I was wanted.

>> Interviewer: Yeah.

>> Stern: And I was just in seventh heaven. And after a year, I was making a dollar an hour, which was 60 -- was making a dollar and a half an hour, \$60 a week.

>> Interviewer: That was pretty good then.

>> Stern: Oh, I was -- I became foreman in his, in his -- see, I had the experience from the labor force -- forced labor camps. I was making spokes, and I was making --

>> Interviewer: Oh, when you were in Henryków.

>> Stern: In Henryków, right. And I was working all kinds of machines, and I was bending -- and I took the liking -- that's the very reason I became a builder here in Columbia. I started building homes to begin with, and then in 1960, I got into commercial building.

>> Interviewer: And you just stayed with it.

>> Stern: And stayed with it. Now I'm developing because my son is -- we quit building. We're developers now.

>> Interviewer: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to add or anything else that you'd like to say?

>> Stern: You're talking about the Holocaust?

>> Interviewer: Any -- yeah, just anything, anything else that you didn't say that you'd like to.

>> Stern: I am delighted to be here, and I am delighted to tell you this story because I feel that guys like you who are volunteers and other people volunteering to do this interview with me and to, I understand, to be introduced in schools as a curriculum, I think it's the most encouraging and the most heart-warming thing I can really expect from anything because if not through education that the Holocaust can happen and it can happen in the United States, God forbid, as it did in Europe because most of the people are followers. Most of the people are followers, and if we don't stop the bigotry, the racism, and if we don't stop the prejudices, and if we don't educate the people what happened, this same Holocaust can happen again. And therefore, I am here, and I don't mind having nightmares after my story in order that the future generations can benefit from it.

>> Interviewer: Thanks very much, Mr. Stern.

>> Stern: Okay? Thank you.

00:32:00